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Speer: An Artist or a Monster?

Abstract

This article discusses the life of Albert Speer, who was hired as an architect by Hitler. It describes him as being someone who worked for a career and ignored the political implications of who he was working for.

Speer: An Artist or a Monster?

Emily Kay Ergang

The regime of Adolf Hitler and his Nazi party produced a number of complex and controversial. One such figure is Albert Speer, the would-be architect of Hitler's new German capital. Speer was one of the only members of Hitler's inner circle who could truly be called a close friend. Speer supposedly did not subscribe to the politics of Nazism, though he constantly turned a blind eye to the genocide of millions of Jews and other war time atrocities. He remained in Hitler's inner circle until the end and stood on trial at Nuremberg. In light of these contradictions, it is difficult to ascertain exactly what kind of a man he was. Was he a monster like Hitler or a deceived and naive artist who dreamed of a triumphant German world that he would, literally, help build? Although his support of Hitler cannot be excused, Speer was, through and through, an artist—he crafted a grandiose German architecture that characterized Berlin in the 1930s and 40s in the same fashion that he crafted an illusion around himself which kept him in a constant state of denial about the horrors of Nazi war atrocities.

Speer's parents and childhood defined what his character would be later in life. His parents were reserved and very proud of their middle-class social situation; his father was a successful architect.⁶⁶⁶ Speer was "physically delicate and of unstable health" during his childhood, and this would have a lasting effect on the young boy.⁶⁶⁷ Indeed, Speer mentions in his memoirs that because of his weak state he felt ostracized by his brothers, and that this type of inadequacy "calls forth compensating forces"; those difficulties helped him learn how to adjust better to "the world of other boys."⁶⁶⁸ Speer claims in his memoirs that this supposed inadequacy enabled him to deal with "difficult circumstances and troublesome people," a tactic that would be useful through his years with the Nazi party.⁶⁶⁹

How did this reserved and sickly boy rise to become Hitler's lauded architect? His entry into architecture was simple enough, as both his father and grandfather had been architects. Speer's father persuaded him not to study his favorite subject, mathematics, but instead to "follow the family tradition."⁶⁷⁰ Amidst the turbulent scene of German politics, Speer somehow kept politics out of his sphere of knowledge – his parents had asserted that "money, erotic escapades, and politics" were taboo subjects inside one's home, and Speer kept that strict rule.⁶⁷¹ This illustrates how truly unimportant politics were in his life as well as how much Speer listened to and obeyed authority figures.

His architectural style began to develop under the tutelage of Professor Heinrich Tessenow, who was a "champion of the spirit of simple craftsmanship in architecture and believed in architectonic expressiveness by severely delimited means"; Speer would encompass this stripped-down, neo-classical style later in his career.⁶⁷² Tessenow's influence would also show in his appreciation for National Socialism—Tessenow and the Nazis were "both motivated

⁶⁶⁶ Joachim Fest, *Speer: The Final Verdict*, trans. Ewald Osers and Alexandra Dring, (New York: Harcourt, Inc., 2001), 15.

⁶⁶⁷ Fest., 14

⁶⁶⁸ Albert Speer, *Inside the Third Reich: Memoirs by Albert Speer*, trans. Richard and Clara Winston, (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1970), 5.

⁶⁶⁹ Speer, 5.

⁶⁷⁰ Fest, 15.

⁶⁷¹ Fest, 19.

⁶⁷² Speer, 11.

by powerful anti-civilizatory feeling, by a hatred of modernism."⁶⁷³ Such ideas would later appear in Speer's own designs.

As he came into his own as an architect, Speer was drawn to the rising Nazi party, although he would later insist it had "nothing to do with 'politics', as if the Nazis were some kind of hobby club."⁶⁷⁴ Speer came to power not through personal politics but by being commissioned by the Nazis. As an architecture student, Speer became so fascinated with the Nazis that he joined the party and the SA in 1931.⁶⁷⁵ Speer had attended one of Hitler's speeches with fellow students and was so impressed by what he saw as a soft, positive speaker that he left feeling there "were new ideals, a new understanding," and hope for Germany.⁶⁷⁶ Hitler was intoxicating and Speer suddenly felt "a sense of partisanship, compounded of sympathy for the crowd and opposition to authority."⁶⁷⁷ Soon he attended a speech by Gauleiter Goebbels, Hitler's propaganda minister, and was moved to joined the party. Despite joining the Nazis, Speer remained a reserved and diffident fellow who would never think of "pummeling Jews in the streets," very different than many other of the Nazi party members.⁶⁷⁸

Speer made his first foray into Nazi architecture when he redecorated several Nazi party headquarters. He was a member of the Motorists Association of the National Socialist Party, which led to his commission at Kreisleitung West, the District Headquarters of the West End.⁶⁷⁹ It was here that he met Karl Hanke, the head of this department, who needed someone to redecorate his new villa and chose Speer to head the project.⁶⁸⁰ It was through this contract that Goebbels discovered and commissioned Speer "to renovate the propaganda ministry as well as his private townhouse in the city."⁶⁸¹ Hitler was impressed with Speer's work and by the speed with which it was accomplished. Hitler then commissioned Speer to rebuild the Borsig Palace to house the top leaders of the SA, and their personal relationship began.⁶⁸² A man with more countenance, a stronger man, and a more political man might have refused these commissions, but Speer was none of these – he was a weaker man who followed orders, one who was fascinated by the Nazis but not their policies, and one who cared about his work and wanted it to flourish. After years of occupational frustration, he "was wild to accomplish things."⁶⁸³ Speer admits in his memoirs that for a commission to construct a great building, such as the Borsig Palace, he "would have sold [his] soul like Faust."⁶⁸⁴ Speer was being commissioned by the most powerful man in Germany, and one did not refuse such an offer.

Speer was soon appointed to a special position within Hitler's inner circle, and as the head of the Building Department he was a part of Hitler's core group. How was his art to flourish, and how did he live with the atrocities that the Nazi party was practicing? The reason Speer's architecture fit so well with Hitler's regime was because both were based on the premise of making Germany great again – Speer had an antipathy for "industrialization, urbanization, and

⁶⁷³ Fest, 27.

⁶⁷⁴ David Clay Large, Berlin, (New York: Basic Books, 2000), 303.

⁶⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶⁷⁶ Speer, 16.

⁶⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 16.

⁶⁷⁸ Large, 303.

⁶⁷⁹ Speer, 21.

⁶⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 21.

⁶⁸¹ Large, 303.

⁶⁸² *Ibid.*, 303.

⁶⁸³ Speer, 31.

⁶⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 31.

the uglification of the world.”⁶⁸⁵ His first major architectural assignment was to design a new complex for the Nazi rallies at Nuremberg. This project characterized Speer’s architecture for the rest of the regime and would cement his celebrity as a brilliant architect. For this project Speer used a style that has been described as “a pumped-up neoclassicism.”⁶⁸⁶ This style would emulate Ancient Greek and Roman architecture, utilizing columns and huge buildings with sharp, clean angles. For the Nuremberg rally grounds, he “proposed a knockoff of the Pergamum Altar” with a huge flight of stairs “topped and enclosed by a long colonnade, flanked on both sides by stone abutments.”⁶⁸⁷ Speer had no qualms about destroying property to make room for his monstrous creations. To make room for the rally stadium Speer had to blow up the streetcar depot, and did so without a second thought.⁶⁸⁸ This explosion brought Speer to another idea, the “Theory of Ruin Value.”

Hitler believed “the purpose of his building[s] was to transmit his time and its spirit to posterity.”⁶⁸⁹ All that was left of the great Roman emperors was their magnificent buildings and art. Hitler understood this and wanted his buildings to invoke the same sense of antiquity, and Speer used that belief to create his Theory of Ruin Value. He saw that the modern buildings of his time “were poorly suited to form that ‘bridge of tradition’ to future generations that Hitler was calling for.”⁶⁹⁰ In light of this, Speer suggested they build these new gigantic buildings in a certain way, using “special materials” and applying “certain principles of statics” to create buildings whose ruins would resemble those of Ancient Rome.⁶⁹¹ Hitler was enthralled with the idea and thus gave orders that “all major buildings of the Reich were to be erected in keeping with this ‘law of ruins.’”⁶⁹² This Theory of Ruin Value and Speer’s construction of the Nuremberg rally grounds made him a celebrity, and his status was further propelled by staging of 1934 Party Congress. During the rally Speer employed “anti-aircraft spotlights” to create a magical “Cathedral of Light” around his newly constructed grounds, a sight forever ingrained in the eyes of anyone who attended the event.⁶⁹³

When Speer became part of Hitler’s inner circle he ignored Nazi atrocities and was complacent as he had been in his youth. In his memoirs Speer acknowledges that if he had only wanted to, he could have learned at the beginning that Hitler wanted to expand the Reich, was a “rank anti-Semite,” and was “committed to a system of authoritarian rule.”⁶⁹⁴ Instead of being a responsible academic and investigating each party’s ideology, comparing them, and then choosing one, he let himself be taken in by the Nazis without any investigation of their policies. Even during the construction of the Borsig Palace, Speer “noticed a pool of dried blood on the floor where Papen’s assistant, Herbert von Bose, had been gunned down in the Night of Long Knives.”⁶⁹⁵ Instead of acknowledging the murder and leaving the job, he simply looked away—

⁶⁸⁵ Fest, 45.

⁶⁸⁶ Large, 304.

⁶⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 304.

⁶⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 304.

⁶⁸⁹ Speer, 55.

⁶⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 56.

⁶⁹¹ *Ibid.*

⁶⁹² Large, 304.

⁶⁹³ *Ibid.*

⁶⁹⁴ Speer, 19.

⁶⁹⁵ Large, 303.

this would be "his response to unpleasant realities during the rest of his career in the Third Reich."⁶⁹⁶

During the middle years of the regime, Speer continued to deny the brutal policies of the Nazis. Party members were told that "grand policy" was much too complex to judge it themselves, so when Speer heard people talking about the "open season on Jews, Freemasons, Social Democrats, or Jehovah's Witnesses," he ignored it and thought it "no affair" of his. Even at the end of the Reich, Speer was so focused on Germania and building his great new German capital that he could not see the war in front of his eyes—his illusions had grown too deep. While most Berliners spent their days fearing impending doom, Speer "found an element of beauty in the raids."⁶⁹⁷ He even noted that "the Allied bombers were accomplishing much of the demolition work that would be necessary for the realization of Germania."⁶⁹⁸ Speer completely ignored the fact that those bombs were killing the future citizens of that great capital.

As the Third Reich came to an end, Hitler went a different way than Speer and a strain was put on their relationship. Speer loved his art, his architecture, and near the end he wanted it to remain intact because he still believed in Germania and the great German state. Hitler, however, sensing the end, wanted to destroy everything. Speer could not have that, so he delayed carrying out his orders. Speer was "shocked that the man who considered himself the 'Savior of Berlin' in the 1930's should now be determined to destroy it," so he "worked during the last weeks of the Reich to prevent this order from being carried out."⁶⁹⁹ This further illustrates that Speer's priority was neither the Nazi regime nor Nazi policies, but rather his art and the beauty of Berlin that he had created. Speer was, first and foremost, an artist.

A most drastic turn-around occurred in their relationship when Speer, so he claims in his memoirs, attempted to murder his former friend, the delusional Fuehrer. A second-hand account states that Speer tried to kill Hitler by "feeding poison gas into the ventilation shaft of the bunker, only to give up the attempt upon discovering that the ground-level shaft had been replaced by a high chimney."⁷⁰⁰ In Speer's own account, he claims that in February of 1945, he "came to the decision to eliminate Hitler."⁷⁰¹ He admits that the plans did not go past the initial stages, but he says that even at that late date, he would occasionally dine with Hitler while simultaneously thinking of a way to obtain poison gas. He even went so far as to ask Dieter Stahl where he could acquire the gas.⁷⁰² At this point Speer recalls how he came to grips with the reality of his situation, that whether or not he was an artist and truly believed in a great Germany, for twelve years he had "lived thoughtlessly among murderers."⁷⁰³ It then makes sense that he would think of the murder of Hitler as the only way to salvage his Berlin. Although this confession saved him during sentencing, the other former Nazis reproached and attacked Speer for breaking his oath to the Fuehrer.⁷⁰⁴

One last argument to be considered is how the rest of the world viewed Speer after the war, specifically after what happened at his trial and sentencing. At the trial, Speer decided on a survival strategy where he would accept responsibility for his actions and even the actions of the

⁶⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 304.

⁶⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 350.

⁶⁹⁸ *Ibid.*

⁶⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 360.

⁷⁰⁰ *Ibid.*

⁷⁰¹ Speer, 429.

⁷⁰² *Ibid.*, 431.

⁷⁰³ *Ibid.*, 430.

⁷⁰⁴ *Ibid.*

regime itself. His defense, in the end, portrayed him just as he has been portrayed in this study—as an apolitical artist thrust into high political office, who grasped at a great career opportunity and became entangled in the Nazi regime.⁷⁰⁵ At the end of the trial, Speer received his sentencing: he was sentenced to 20 years imprisonment under two counts of the original charges, mostly “for his participation in the forced labor program.”⁷⁰⁶ The official court at Nuremberg did not sentence him to the death penalty because they recognized that Speer “was one of the few men who had the courage to tell Hitler that the war was lost and to take steps to prevent the senseless destruction of production facilities.”⁷⁰⁷ Even the court agreed that he was not a murderous monster. He was an artist who became mixed up with the wrong people at the wrong time.

Albert Speer was a man who believed in art and the beauty of Germany, but he was also one of Hitler’s only true friends and a Nazi celebrity. Although he became close to Hitler and participated in one of the worst political regimes in the history of mankind, he somehow managed to remain an artist. Speer’s architecture was what was most important in his life—he considered politics an area he was not involved in. In the end one sees that Speer was not a monster as much as he was an artist. Speer was an artist who chose a career over politics and turned a blind eye to the atrocities he could have easily seen if he had only tried. Because of this, he deserved the twenty years in prison that he received. Speer represents a possible story of redemption because he was a man who came to realize his mistakes and became a better person and perhaps a better artist because of it.

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⁷⁰⁵ Fest, 287-288.

⁷⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 306.

⁷⁰⁷ *Ibid.*